



Hallowed Ground

Three hundred years ago Deerfield was an obscure village precariously situated on the northwestern frontier of New England. Because of this location, it had become an obvious target in the wars between Native peoples and English colonists and between English and French empires. Deerfield had been attacked seven times during the 1690s, and renewed attacks were likely when fighting resumed in 1702. Yet, despite a series of warnings, some very specific, that began arriving in May of 1703, nothing prepared the village's residents for the assault that came on February 29, 1704.

BY KEVIN SWEENEY

NOT LONG BEFORE DAWN ON LEAP-YEAR DAY, 250 to 300 Abenakis, Frenchmen, Hurons, Mohawks, Pennacooks and Iroquois of the Mountain fell upon Deerfield. This raiding party was one of the largest and the most diverse to attack a New England town. The conviction that a good offense was the best defense had led the leaders of a sparsely populated and vulnerable New France to call upon its Native allies to join 48 to 50 Canadian-born French raiders in an expedition against New England's frontier. In villages along the Saint Lawrence River and in northern New England, Native peoples responded to the call. Abenakis at Odanak and Pennacooks at Cowass probably saw the raid as part of a conflict dating back to 1676 that was fought to resist the New Englanders' invasion of their lands. Living at Odanak in 1704 were Native people, including Pocumtucks, and their offspring who had been driven from southern New England. For peoples such as the Hurons of Lorette, the Iroquois of the Mountain, and the Mohawks of Kahnawake, who usually had few ties to New England, the Deerfield raid offered an opportunity to take captives who might be adopted to replace dead relatives. At the same time, participating in the raid allowed all of these Native peoples an occasion to reaffirm alliances with the French and each other that had become important parts of their survival strategies in a world turned upside down by wars and diseases brought from Europe.

The raiders' target was a village of some 275 residents that had been reinforced by the presence of 20 militiamen from nearby towns. A majority of the town's permanent residents had sought refuge within a ten-foot-high stockade that enclosed an area which today includes the buildings facing the town Common. The north wall of this palisade stood behind the present-day locations of the Classroom Building, the Brick Church, and the Manse. On its east side, the stockade ran behind the Manse, Mather, Scaife, Pocumtuck, Historic Deerfield's Frary House and the Nims House. In 1704 the homes of Samuel Carter, Thomas French (the town clerk), John Catlin, Sampson Frary and Godfrey Nims stood in a line from north to south inside the east wall. Opposite these houses, across the then mud-rutted lot that surrounded the village's meetinghouse, were homes of John Sheldon, Benoni Stebbins, John Williams (the town's minister), Mehuman Hinsdale and John Richards (the town's

teacher). The stockade's west wall ran behind these houses. Today, the Classroom Building, Arms Building, Main School Building, Ephraim Williams House, Saxton House, John Russell House and John Williams House occupy these sites. A southern wall with a gate completed the stockade's circuit. Also located inside these walls were at least ten temporary dwellings, some no more than cellar holes with roofs, that housed families who sought refuge inside the stockade in times of danger. This stockade, which gave Deerfield residents a false sense of security, proved to be worse than useless as a defensive barrier since it was too large to defend, easy for adult males to scale in the winter, and a death trap for women and children caught on the inside.

Life in the village's homes was crowded and noisy even when compared to today's dorm life. In addition to two adults, there would have been, on average, six to seven children ranging in age from toddlers to those in their late teens. Offering space to relatives or neighbors who ordinarily lived outside the stockade only made the situation worse. These houses looked nothing like the interiors of the restored 18th and 19th-century houses found today along The Street in Deerfield. Most houses in 1704 were small: a story or a story-and-a-half tall with two to three rooms and an unheated garret or attic in which adolescents would have slept. Beds as well as rooms were shared. Houses were sparsely furnished, cold, dirty and very vulnerable to determined assailants.

The initial assault that February morning caught the sleeping village completely unaware. Some of the attackers scaled the stockade's north wall by climbing up a bank where snow had drifted up against the outside of the wall. Once inside they opened the north gate, just in front of where the Brick Church now stands. Because of the size and diversity of the raiding party and its members' differing aims, the attackers failed to achieve the coordination and total surprise that had characterized French and Indian assaults on other towns. Competition for captives and personal honor rather than cooperation appears to have characterized the attackers. Different members of the family of the Reverend John Williams, whose house stood where the Main School Building now stands, were taken by Abenakis, Pennacooks, Mohawks and probably Iroquois of the Mountain. In the chaos and confusion some Deerfield residents managed to hide or escape or to mount

a defense. Due in part to the stout defense of the Benoni Stebbins House, which stood in front of where the Arms Building is today, houses and residents south of the stockade escaped largely untouched. Still, the attackers killed 41 people inside the stockade—most of them women and children—wounded an unknown number, and took 112 prisoners.

The arrival of a relief party of militiamen from Hadley, Hatfield, and Northampton drove out the attackers and saved some of the residents and homes within the stockade. Among the houses, the most notable survivor was the home of John Sheldon, which stood until 1848 on the site of the Classroom Building and came to be known as the Old Indian House. Militiamen, joined by some residents, pursued the retreating raiders into the North Meadows where they were ambushed and chased back to the stockade. Two residents and seven men from neighboring towns died in the Meadows Fight. Overall, casualties among the raiders were heavier than one would expect for an attack later characterized as a massacre: 22 Frenchmen were wounded, among them the French commander and one of his brothers, three Frenchmen killed, seven Natives killed outright, and an unknown number wounded, including the leader of the Hurons who died from his wounds.

Colonial New Englanders, though shocked and outraged by the attack, did not call it a massacre. They knew what a massacre was: they had seen a number of raids and battles more deadly than the attack on Deerfield, and they had attempted at various times their own massacres of the

region's Native people. What impressed observers at the time were the number of prisoners taken and the general destruction at Deerfield. For almost a century afterward, the raid was usually characterized as "the assault on" or "destruction of" Deerfield. The word massacre first appeared in print in 1804, when the Reverend John Taylor of Deerfield used the word in a sermon commemorating what he still called the "Destruction of the Town." After his sermon, some 19th-century writers occasionally did speak of "the Deerfield Massacre," but it was only in the early 1900s that name "Deerfield Massacre" gained wide currency, probably as part of an effort to stimulate tourism.

In 1704, however, it was the huge number of captives that upset most colonial New Englanders and has continued to attract the attention of those interested in the attack. The size of the raiding party and the presence of Kahnawake Mohawks, Hurons from Lorette and Iroquois of the Mountain who were looking specifically for captives to adopt, not people to kill, led to the taking of a record number of prisoners: 112. Of the Deerfield captives, 86 to 89 survived the grueling 300-mile trek through the snow to Native and French communities in Canada. Natives who hoped to adopt younger captives into their communities and those who intended to sell their prisoners had a stake in keeping them alive. Still, 19 captives who were unable to keep up are known to have been killed on the march and two starved to death. Most of those who died were very young children unable to eat the parched corn and uncooked meat, or

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS: While a group of French and Native fighters beat back pursuing English militiamen from Deerfield and nearby towns, others herded their 112 men, women, and children captives across the Deerfield River and readied them for the 300-mile march through Abenaki territory to New France. At their previous night's campsite, Natives replaced many captives' shoes with heavy wrapping around winter moccasins to make walking in snow easier. From a low bluff just north of Deerfield, they could see the burning town behind them.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES: Illustrator Francis Back chronicled the journey of the captives, their arrival in Canada, and aspects of tribal life. The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association's website comes alive with these exquisite illustrations.



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married women who became exhausted; none of the teenage captives died on the march north.

Certain patterns can be seen in the fates of the Deerfield captives who made it to Canada. Those taken prisoner by Abenakis, Pennacooks, Hurons and Iroquois of the Mountain passed fairly quickly into the hands of the French. But because of the size of the village of Kahnawake and its independence, the Mohawks had more success incorporating into their village seven young girls from Deerfield, among them Eunice Williams, a daughter of the town's minister. French communities were even more successful than these various Native villages at incorporating Deerfield captives. Sixteen Deerfield residents remained permanently in New France after the War's end in 1713. With two exceptions, those who remained in Canada were under the age of thirteen; all but one of the teenage and adult captives who made it to Canada returned to New England. In all, 62 of the Deerfield captives who survived the march to Canada were ransomed and returned when given an opportunity. About half of these returnees settled again in Deerfield and helped rebuild the shattered community.

For those who returned, and their children and descendants, keeping alive the memory of this event became part of keeping alive their town through subsequent colonial wars, through the divisions of the American Revolution that split the town right down the middle between Patriots and Loyalists, through the often disruptive economic and social

changes that marked the prosperous years of the early 1800s, and during the hard times of the later 1800s and early 1900s, when the past looked better than the future. By the early 1900s some residents came to the conclusion that the future of the town actually lay in its past, and in its heritage. Not surprisingly, Frank Boyden made use of the village's heritage and fame in his efforts to revitalize Deerfield Academy.

This tradition of remembering 1704 continues as the academy, the town of Deerfield, Historic Deerfield, and the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association plan a series of events to commemorate the February 29 raid. A cantata, *One Blood*, by Majorie Merryman has already been performed and an opera, *The Captivation of Eunice Williams*, premiered in the Brick Church on February 28. The same weekend an exhibit, "Remembering 1704" opened at Historic Deerfield's Flynt Center, and the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association launched its website exhibit, "The Many Stories of 1704," www.1704.deerfield.history.museum. The town's official commemoration will take place on the weekend of June 26 and 27. ■

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